

HUMAN RESOURCES

Remote Working 2.0: Balancing Work and Family during the Coronavirus Pandemic

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During times of crisis, remote employees must serve dual roles as caregivers and workers.

✓ **INSIGHT** | NOTE 28 Apr 2020

Two colleagues at the grocery store (maintaining six-plus feet of social distance):

Colleague one (entering the store): How are you?

Colleague two (exiting the store): Stressed. I promised to work on things I knew I could do remotely, but I didn't take into consideration that the kids are now at home, and they need help with school work. I didn't think about how the ten-minute store runs now last two hours or that my internet would crash from the whole family working at the same time. The stress is getting to me.

Colleague one: I'm in the same boat. My partner works from home full-time but isn't expected to have changes in productivity even though we have to help the kids meet daily deadlines. I'm learning trigonometry again and spent two hours today just printing the kids' school work. And my five-year-old keeps photo-bombing my video conferences.

Sound familiar? COVID-19 has changed the way business is conducted throughout the world. Shelter in place or similar orders have been implemented to slow its spread, requiring billions of employees to work from home. To most, the task of working from home may seem isolating, but doable. Indeed, research-based guidance on how to do so has been established. However, as the coronavirus pandemic has called for schools and daycares to close, restaurants to shut down, it has created obstacles to remote working unlike those ever experienced before. We are in a new era, that of **Remote Working 2.0**, and there is immense uncertainty as to how long this will last.

Closed daycares, schools, and afterschool services demand parents and caregivers help more with school work, and make daily lunches and snacks. While some may shift childcare to grandparents, the risk of putting older family members in contact with children who could be asymptomatic carriers of the virus eliminates this option for others. Additionally, many schools require high school students to be online during specific hours, making it difficult for them to help watch younger siblings. Also, older kids may interrupt their working parents to get help with homework. In addition, employees could be disrupted by sibling squabbles and temper tantrums. All this can derail one's train of thought, put conference calls in tailspins, and drastically decrease employee performance while increasing stress. To help alleviate employees' difficulties of working from home during the coronavirus pandemic, we offer managers these Remote Working 2.0 tips.

1. Reduce meeting size

Reducing work groups into 3-5 person teams to allow more flexibility in meeting times may help employees balancing family and work. It is easier to schedule a meeting with four people than eleven. These smaller teams may consist of only core personnel or subcommittees. In fact, Amazon's CEO Jeff Bezos believes in the "two pizza rule" - he prefers to attend meetings where two pizzas will sufficiently feed the entire team. If this is not the case, the team is too large and inefficient. Further, **studies have shown that smaller groups improve performance and productivity**. First, smaller teams allow every voice and idea to be heard and recognized.

Second, better communication skills are enjoyed in smaller teams, especially when the ability to communicate with each other is not restricted to face-to-face contact alone. Third, work assignments can be made more efficiently with individual tasks based explicitly on areas of expertise. This not only improves the end result, but carries with it a greater sense of employee pride in the output.

2. Reduce the frequency and length of meetings

A study conducted prior to the COVID-19 pandemic found that **employees at one large corporation spent about 300,000 hours on weekly meetings alone**. This time excluded prep work before meetings, which indicates that the total time spent preparing, attending, conducting, and accessing meetings can be excessive. During periods of crisis where employees are expected to work remotely and remain productive, managers must consider reducing the occurrences and length of meetings. In fact, **researchers have found that having fewer meetings can actually improve employee performance**. One way to accomplish this is to consolidate meeting topics such that the most necessary topics are prioritized. Managers should also set time limits for meetings. The most effective time-frames for remote meetings should be anywhere from 45-75 minutes.

3. Let go of micromanaging

Micromanaging personnel can decrease employee morale and productivity. Employee disengagement is a serious consequence of micromanagement. How can managers avoid the pitfall of micromanaging? Research suggests this can be achieved by **setting clear outcomes and specifying constraints** for the task at hand as well as by making employees feel they have ownership.

It should be noted that under management may not be something managers can afford either. For employees who are navigating the difficulties of working from home, juggling family responsibilities and meeting work deadlines while simultaneously feeling anxious about the possibility of losing their job - paired with the adverse effects of social isolation on their mental and emotional well-being - sufficient guidance needs to be provided.

4. Employ flexible work hours

Flexible work hours allow employees to work around the current challenges. This means expecting employees to work intermittently across weekdays, including weekends, without the confines of the typical workday schedule. Some employees may be able to let their children sleep in and meet before their kids wake up. While some managers may fear that flexible work hours may produce adverse effects on productivity, **recent research shows otherwise**. Allowing employees to work with considerable leeway concerning the timing and location of their work leads to greater job satisfaction, more resource focus, and lower employee turnover.

5. Anticipate and Accept

During times of crisis when cities are shutting down, managers of remote workers must anticipate employees' dual roles as caregivers and workers. Employees may have to leave a meeting early in order to help family members; children may be heard in the background or even pop up on the screen. Managers should not scorn these employees or show

disapproval (either vocally or through body language). Rather, managers must understand that Remote Working 2.0 is the new normal, at least for now. In this new era, it is the management's role to suggest "five-minute bathroom breaks" during meetings when there seems to be an issue with a child (in the background or foreground) or when there is no issue at all, so that parents can check on their kids. In addition, managers should show encouragement by thanking everyone for working so hard under these new conditions. Saying something as simple as "I just want to thank you guys for all your efforts during these trying times. You're appreciated" will decrease employee stress, improve morale, and increase productivity.

Final thoughts

Working remotely has become commonplace. However, when crises strike and employees are asked to do so with little preparation and increased responsibilities, it can be extremely difficult. Activation of the suggestions given here, alone or in concert, should help employees balance work and family. Doing so also allows firms to protect their most valuable resource, its people.



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